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ABSTRACT

Use of English-language mystery movies is recommended to teach English-as-a-Second-Language listening and speech skills outside an English-language environment. A variety of issues are discussed, including the following: presenting the film in segments for more effectiveness; presenting students with activities that develop specific aspects of the film (dialogue completion, intonation practice, character description, prediction of future events, cultural elements, nonverbal behavior); preparation of a transcript to facilitate study of idioms or vocabulary; and selection of an appropriate film. Pre-teaching questions to motivate students are offered, and specific activities designed to accompany an Agatha Christie murder mystery are outlined. (Contains 13 references.) (MSE)

Who Dunnit? Language Activities for Mystery Movies

A paper originally presented at the Third Annual Korea TESOL Conference
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BACKGROUND

Teacher, what can I do to improve my English? This question is often heard in East Asian countries. Students may think that studying more grammar, memorizing more vocabulary items, or taking more courses is the answer, but they sometimes ask us whether there is another way. We teachers usually prescribe more input—reading to improve reading and writing skills, conversation or listening opportunities to improve those skills. For speaking and listening, however, our prescription is not usually feasible. Very seldom can we place students in the middle of Kansas or some other native-speaking environment for a few months or find them native speaker exchange partners. Opportunities for interacting with native speakers of English are somewhat limited, particularly outside major cities, so what can we do?

Cable TV seems to be everywhere in East Asia. Along with expanded broadcasting in local languages, cable TV brings more programs in English (with and without first language subtitles), from the ubiquitous *CNN International* to movie channels and sports channels. Cable TV is not a cure-all for students' language problems. Ordinarily television is not interactive; it cannot help students correct what they have misunderstood. Furthermore, the average student may be afraid of authentic English programs without native language subtitles (while *ELT video* refer to videos made specifically for ESL/EFL students, *authentic video* usually refers to videos made for native speakers). We have a potential resource which students may be afraid to use or, more likely, not know how to use for language learning. It is therefore the teacher's job to present the student with effective strategies for improving their English listening skills through authentic video.

When inexperienced teachers think of using video in class, they may consider showing a movie. However, when teaching language skills through video, films are generally a poor choice because of their length. Our attention spans in foreign languages are rather short and, because we concentrate harder, we tire more quickly. Thus if we show a film straight through from beginning to end, it is easy for students to lose the thread of the story and fall asleep in the darkened room. A much more effective strategy is to present the film in shorter segments. For some scenes we may focus on language by asking students to complete a dialogue, mimic intonation, write a description of a character, or predict what will happen next. For other scenes we can direct students to cultural elements or nonverbal behavior. Yet other scenes, particularly those in which actions seem to tell the story, we may show with very little linguistic analysis to move the story along. The preparation of a transcript facilitates the study of vocabulary and idioms in context. Ideally,

we should watch each segment more than once, and students should have access to the materials for review and homework assignments outside of class.

To keep students' interest, we need a good story. The classic murder mystery meets this criterion. Moreover, students may be fans of this genre in their native language, and the generally predictable direction of the story aids comprehension. For our elective class in Advanced Listening with third and fourth year English majors, we chose Agatha Christie's *A Caribbean Mystery* (BBC, 1989). Christie's books have been translated into many languages and are known throughout the world. Joan Hickson's portrayal of Miss Marple in the 12 stories developed for television has also been acclaimed.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS WHEN CHOOSING A MYSTERY FILM

Mystery films usually run from about 45 minutes to over 100 minutes without commercials, so we should certainly use the video both to provide language input and to elicit student language production (Arcario, 1993). Good mysteries provide many opportunities for prediction and discussion of who could have committed the murder and why; however, the language input varies with each film. For example, many of the best known and loved mystery writers are British (e.g., Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, P. D. James, Ruth Rendell, Colin Dexter, Ellis Peters, with the *Columbo* series the notable American exception). Students in Taiwan, who are taught American English, sometimes object to British English, yet in today's world they will need to at least comprehend the somewhat standard British varieties, particularly with their contacts with European, who learn British English.

In *A Caribbean Mystery* we hear Miss Marple with her genteel, proper language; Mr. Rafiel, a self-made man, with his Cockney and regional features; the Dysons, who are supposed to be American with a Southern accent, and several locals with different levels of Bajan (Barbados English). Whether or not the actors are putting on an accent, they provide good practice for our students. (Christie's Poirot stories were not even considered because this main character has a Belgian accent; in order to give students practice with nonnative speaker English, it is probably better to provide authentic examples instead of actors.)

This genre has another characteristic we need to consider. Unlike popular detective and police series, which show a lot of action and perhaps also violence, these murder mystery classics almost never show any violence. For example, we may see an apprehensive woman walking alone late at night, hear footsteps approaching, see the woman turn with a frightened look, and then the scene shifts to the commonplace morning and the report of the crime, with the police arriving on the scene. Murders are still gruesome and we may still want to avoid this genre for that reason, yet here violence is minimized. The main focus is finding the clues and solving the puzzle. Action films are easier to comprehend because we can see what is happening. The type of murder mystery discussed here is more difficult because many of the clues and much of the reasoning involved in solving the crime are presented through conversations/language, not through actions.

Characterization is important. These mysteries are not one-shot films. John thaw has played Inspector Morse over a dozen times; we expect him to enjoy his beer at any nearby pub, get Lewis to pay for it, and then go home and listen to Wagner. Miss Marple knits and asks nosy question the way old ladies do. And who would recognize Columbo without his cigar, baggy raincoat, and broken-down old car? But what is comfortably familiar to the genre lover may seem perhaps unfamiliar to some students.

Some may voice concern that Christie's England (about 1950 in *A Caribbean Mystery*) is not the England of today. Neither is Chaucer's, for that matter. Does all our material have to reflect contemporary culture? *A Caribbean Mystery* is set in the West Indies, Barbados in the film. Most of the characters are away from home on holiday; the Caribbean tourists see today looks much the same, as does conservative beach attire. Colin Dexter's Morse and Ruth Rendell's Wexford are a little more current. However, students may also prefer to see main characters younger than the 70-plus Miss Marple, grandfather Wexford, and aging Morse.

ACTIVITIES

Pre-Teaching Questions

Do you like murder mysteries?
Do you read these kinds of novels? Or watch them on TV? Which ones?
Describe the heroes of these stories? Who are they?
Have you ever read any of the stories of Agatha Christie?
And so on

Asking these kinds of questions is probably a more motivating way to begin than giving a reading or talk on the life of Agatha Christie. One should at some point give students at least a one-page summary of her life. There are a number of popular useful references, such as Sanders and Lovallo (1984) and especially her autobiography (Christie, 1977).

Describe the Characters

A Caribbean Mystery begins beautifully. All eleven major characters parade by during the first few minutes doing what they usually do each morning on vacation, and their behavior reflects their personalities. We can give students a list of the characters in order of appearance and give them these directions.

As you watch the opening scene of this film, you will see each of the following characters appear in this order. Write down some of your ideas about each character.

NAME	DESCRIPTION
Lucky Dyson	_____
Miss Jane Marple	_____
Major Palgrave	_____
Greg Dyson (and so on)	_____

Now, with the person(s) next to you, share your ideas about the kind of person you think each of these characters is.

Not only is this a way for students to learn to distinguish the characters, but it also gives them opportunity for speculation. Each character's nonverbal behavior, along with the few lines they speak and the music played, is meant to reflect character. Lucky Dyson strolls seductively in from a swim, Miss Marple knits, Major Palgrave reads and comments upon articles in a three-day-old newspapers, Greg Dyson grumpily lifts his head from a lawn chair on which he has been asleep. A group discussion activity can generate character sketches or, at the very least, a list of adjectives. For example, students describe Lucky as a middle-aged woman who likes men because of the way she walks in her white swimsuit.

Prediction

About 15 minutes into the film, the situation is set for a murder which will occur during the night. This provides a wonderful opportunity for an in-class group discussion activity and/or a written homework assignment, given as follows.

Tonight there will be a murder. Your job is to decide who will be murdered, who will be the murderer, and what will be the reason for the murder. Discuss this with the person(s) next to you/Write down this information in one paragraph or more.

If students do the writing assignment, they can read out their ideas and ask each other questions before we show the next scene and find out who the victim was. Many students correctly name Major Palgrave as the victim because he talks too much about some vague previous murders, and they see Lucky as guilty of something, but, of course, there are about 60 more minutes worth of deduction before all is revealed.

Vocabulary Study

New vocabulary need not be presented as (bilingual) lists of words. We can have students guess the meaning from context, sometimes with the help of multiple choice answers, as in the following example from Major Palgrave.

Look at the following segment of text from the story. See whether you can guess the meaning of the words/phrases in ***bold.***

That's not the only **(1) fishy** business to have happened in these parts. ... A neurotic woman. (2) **Did herself in.** But a year or so later this doctor type was **(3) swapping yarns** with **(4) a fellow medico** and came up with much the same story, you see.

1.	(a) maritime	(b) suspicious	(c) piscatorial
2.	(a) checked herself into a sanitarium	(b) locked herself in the house	(c) committed suicide

3. (a) sharing knitting patterns (b) telling stories (c) trading information
4. (a) another doctor (b) another criminal (c) a drinking partner

Such guessing can be fun, especially if we include a few bizarre answers. Students who depend too much on word by word dictionary translations will easily be fooled but may come to realize that their pocket computer dictionaries have serious limitations.

Nonverbal and Paralinguistic Behavior

Nonverbal behavior combined with intonation can reveal a number of things, as when Miss Marple says of Major Palgrave after his death, with a look indicating her disapproval at the excess of his alcohol consumption, *Yes, he **was** drinking.* Students can also practice along with the instances of contrastive stress, as with the different meanings of *another* in the following exchange:

MARPLE: There might be a very powerful motive if
RAFIEL: If, if
MARPLE: If there was going to be *another* murder.
RAFIEL: There's already been *another* murder.
MARPLE: No, I mean *another* murder.
RAFIEL: *Another* murder? How many do you want?

Analysis and Criticism

An activity that may be more suitable for a literature class project would be to read the novel, watch the film version, and then write a comparison of both versions. Students might even gain some idea of the changes screenplay writers have to make (cf. Pulverness, 1997). In our Advanced Listening class with university English majors in Taiwan, we used this approach for a final project: students read Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and compared it with the 1985 film version (Robert Halmi, Inc.) starring George C Scott. Students had to compare three different areas (for example, characters, plot, perspective), comment on their own reactions to the changes (including speculating on why the changes were made and what changes they would make), and comment on their listening ability with regard to the film.

CLOSING COMMENTS

The biggest problem in dealing with lengthy pieces such as films is boredom. Covering each scene in detail would be deadly and take up too much class time. Scenes in which the action tells most of the story can be gone through more quickly,, along with perhaps a few comprehension questions to make sure none of the students lost the story along the way. Another possibility is to do some student language production activities, e.g., *Based on what you have just seen, what do you think is/will ...?* Scenes in which there is interesting linguistic usage worthy of pointing out (e.g., contrastive stress, culture-based expressions) or critical clues to the story might more easily lend themselves to perception/comprehension with more limited production activities as, for example, when students hear lines with contrastive stress and then try to mimic them.

In recent years, many books, article, and papers have appeared on how to teach specific films (e.g., Christopher & Ho, 1995; Mejia & O'Conner, 1994; Tatsuki, 1995), specific parts of films (Flynn, 1997), and on introducing film criticism in EFL (Guest, 1997). Teachers can find assistance from websites dedicated to movies (Davis & Newfields, 1998). As with most lessons, if the teacher believes in the materials, in this case the film, and works creatively at developing appropriate classroom activities, the lesson will be a box office hit with the students.

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